

## Chapter Six

### A Test Of Courage: The Carson Mission

Just when Joseph was finally able to get all four of his wives settled in their own homes at Salt Lake City, White's Fort, American Fork and Church Pastures he was called on a mission which would prove to be a severe test of his faith and courage. During the spring conference on April 6th, 1856 a mission call was made for a select group of the strongest in both faith and stamina to settle the Carson Valley Mission, then a part of Utah Territory at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It would require a long, hard journey across the Great Salt Lake Desert, the Humboldt Sinks and the Forty Mile Desert to get to Mormon Station, now Genoa, Nevada. Joseph was one of those chosen because Brigham Young recognized in him a strong pioneer quality of strength, courage and dedication to a cause, a man who loved the gospel with all his heart and who was obedient to those in authority. Though the way was long and the days hard, Joseph completed his mission faithfully.

Brigham Young first became interested in the Carson Valley as early as 1847 when Sam Brannan came from California and told him of the fine farm and range land to be had there. Men of the Mormon Battalion returning to Zion the following year also brought encouraging reports of the valley, but they also told harrowing tales of

the grim desert country between Salt Lake City and the Sierras. for the first few years after the Saints settled in the Salt Lake valley they were too busy just wresting a living from the sterile land to explore new areas, but by the mid-1850's Brigham Young was anxious to establish an outer cordon of settlements between his new Zion and the gentile world beyond.

In June, 1850 Abner Blackburn led a party of Saints to California, seven of whom chose to remain at Carson Valley. They built a 20' x 60' log building which they called Mormon Station, and did a thriving trade business with gold miners enroute to California, selling beef for \$1 a pound while bacon and flour brought \$2 per pound. They reported that miners were so desperate that they would trade their worn out horses for a few loaves of bread.<sup>(1)</sup>

John Reese purchased Mormon Station that fall and built a 30' x 50' log hotel, several cabins and a stock corral, after which the tiny settlement became known as Reese's Station. But not everyone liked the site, for in 1853 Bishop Edwin Wooley while enroute to California wrote, "It is the most God forsaken place I was ever in!"<sup>(2)</sup> But Oliver Huntington thought differently when he reported "Its soil and climate are equal to the best in the mountains, and its timber is inexhaustible."<sup>(3)</sup>

Carson County, Utah Territory was organized in 1854, and in May of the following year Brigham Young sent Orson Hyde to be the counties first Probate Judge. But the miners there refused to accept Hyde as their judge or to acknowledge the authority of the Mormon courts. Hyde wrote to Young requesting that he send a large party

of settlers in order to assure Mormon control of the area. Hyde acknowledged that it would be a difficult mission, and asked Young to send "only the strongest, those who can farm, work at grist mills or sawmills, or who are mechanics or artisans." (4)

Joseph Murdock answered the description of the kind of man Orson Hyde wanted, and although he was reluctant to leave his hard won homes, he tarried not but outfitted two wagons, one with an ox team and the other a horse team. He also got together a mixed herd of horses and cattle ready for the trail. The mission call came during the general conference in April, 1856, just 26 years to the day after the church was organized. Joseph sold his homes at Salt Lake City and Church Pastures for what little he could get for them, but kept his land at White's Fort and Eunice's home at American Fork. Three of his four wives were to accompany him to Carson, including Eliza and her three children, Sara Ann and John Heber, both born at Church Pastures and Joseph Thomas, born December 15th, 1855 at White's Fort. Also going to Carson was Jane with her son David Nathaniel, born April 25th, 1855 at Church Pastures and Elizibeth with her baby Jonathan, who was born at Church Pastures on August 19th, 1855. The two Indian children, Pick and Pernetta also went with the family, only Eunice remaining behind at her home at American Fork.

A wagon train of 54 families made up of 257 men, women and children began the hazardous journey, traveling around the north end of the Great Salt Lake to the Malad River to avoid crossing the worst part of the Great Salt Lake Desert. Brigham Young accompanied them as far as the Malad River where he stood on the seat of his wagon



Jane Sharp Murdock  
Third wife of Joseph Murdock,  
photo taken late in her life  
author

station in July, 1856, and after seeing what a fertile place it was, Joseph decided to make it his permanent home and raise his family there. He had no way of knowing that his time at Carson would be short, with little but hardship ahead.

Upon their arrival at Carson, Judge Orson Hyde advised them, "Labor hard, settle up, mind your own business and live your religion, fear God and work righteousness. This is the best farm land I ever had and the best place to make money I ever saw."<sup>(7)</sup> Joseph and Abraham Hunsaker in partnership purchased a ranch from William "Lucky Bill" Thorington, a tough old cross between a Mountain Man and a horse thief. They paid "Lucky Bill" \$5,000 for the ranch, although Joseph doesn't say whether they paid in cash or if terms were agreed upon. It may have possible that they had that much money between them from the sale of their properties at the Salt Lake Valley.

Abraham Hunsaker's journal states, "When we arrived I looked around considerable to get a good location, and finally by the counsel of Brother Orson Hyde, I and Joseph Murdock bought the best farm in Carson County from a man by the name of Lucky Bill. We got enough bread, meat and potatos, turnips and garden stuff to do us plentifully. We began plowing and planted pleasure trees, shrubs and roses."<sup>(8)</sup> They hired some Piute Indians to help clear the land and soon had 90 acres under cultivation, planted in wheat and barley.

Joseph had a fine, large rock home built, where his large family could all live together comfortably. Everyone lived in close harmony, for with three wives and seven children, they had to! Though both the Murdock and Hunsaker families worked together, Abraham Hunsaker

was generally responsible for the farming operations while Joseph took care of the livestock. Joseph's wives made butter and cheese which they packed into wooden firkins and also packed fresh eggs in wooden kegs filled with oats to prevent them from breaking. Joseph would load their farm produce into pack saddles and leading a pack train would follow some lonely trail across the Sierra Nevadas to the settlements in California where he would trade for needed goods which weren't available at Carson Valley. He soon came to know all the back trails and Indian tracks across the mountains. His long trips were made during perilous times, for California miners had killed several Indians and in retribution the Indians frequently ambushed and killed lone travelers.

Joseph had a magnetic influence over the Indians, learned through experience while crossing the plains and later at Salt Lake Valley and during the Indian troubles at Utah Valley. His rapport with them is well illustrated in an excerpt from his journal. "A man at Reese's Station shot an Indian in cold blood, for which the Indians raised on the warpath and came to my house at night and called me out. I went out and found there were about 40 Indians, all painted black. I knew they were angry and asked who they were mad at. They told me they were mad at all the whites and also with the Indians who worked for me. I asked them if they were mad at me, and they said no, that they loved me. I told them that I loved them too. Poito, their Chief, talked to them and they agreed to let my Indians alone." (9) The Indians could see how Joseph was raising and educating his two Indian children, Pick and Pernetta, just as if they were his own

natural children, and couldn't help but be impressed with his care and love for them.

Not long afterwards, while Joseph was making a dangerous trip across the mountains to California, his influence with the Indians saved his life. "I started for California and had gone only a short way when I overtook a stranger going the same way. After traveling together a little he told me he was carrying a great deal of gold and wanted to continue with me. I agreed and we traveled on until we reached the foot of the mountains, where we camped for the night. About ten o'clock at night a man came running down the mountain and said Indians were killing men in the mountains. In the morning we climbed into the mountains and found a man dead. All of his clothing had been taken from him. I knew him, his name was Mack Macklin. We traveled until night, finding another dead man on the way. We reached the first house on Mary's River and reported the bodies we had found. That night we reached Placerville alright.

"On my return, at the head of Mary's River where the trail is in heavy timber, I was surrounded by 40 Indians. I thought I was a goner. Then one of them called me by name, so I was alright. They wanted to know who the man was who had been traveling with me, and I told them he was my friend. They said it was alright for me to travel through the mountains, for all the Indians knew me. Their Chief said they always knew when I was crossing the mountains, for they always went with me. I was surprised, for I had never seen any Indians following me. He said that hereafter I must always travel alone, which I told them I would do, and so I was preserved." (10)

The Indian troubles worsened and many men were killed in the mountains, but Joseph always traveled alone after being warned not to take anyone with him, and his Indian friends watched over him. His decision to heed their warning saved his life again only a few weeks later. "One day a man riding a fine horse came to see me and said he had been told that I took pack trains across the mountains to California, and asked me to take him. He said it meant everything for him to get to San Francisco by a certain day. He offered me his fine horse and a large sum of money if I would take him with me. He had the finest horse I had ever seen, and I was about to say yes when I remembered what the Indians had told me. I told him it would be some time before I went again, and advised him that since the Indians were in an ugly mood, it would not be safe for him to go. He was very angry and said everything depended upon him getting to his place of appointment no matter what the cost, and rode away. A few days later I found his body in the mountains. He had been scalped. I searched for his horse but never saw it again." (11)

Several children were born to Joseph at Carson Valley, including Nymphus Hyrum to Jane on February 23rd, 1857 and Alva Moroni to Elizibeth on April 26th, 1857. Like Joseph, Alva was destined to be a colonizer and a missionary to the Lamanites. Rocksina, a beautiful girl was born to Eliza under harsh conditions along the trail, as will be described later. On March 15th, 1857 Pick and Pernetta, Joseph's Lamanite children, were baptized and on the same day Abraham Hunsaker was made well from a long sickness by the laying on of hands by Joseph. In Hunsaker's journal we read the following.



"We hold meetings every third day or twice a week with Brother Joseph Murdock and his family. His family and mine filled a considerable sized room. This day (March 15th, 1857) I have our horses harnessed up to the carraige and go to the West Fork of the Carson River with my family. Also Joseph Murdock and his folks, where we stop at the bank of the stream and sing a hymn and have a prayer and go into the water a baptize my son Abraham and my boy Lemuel, who is a Lamanite. Also, Brother Murdock baptized his two Lamanites, Pickett and Pernetta. We returned home and I was taken worse of my sickness, so I called on Brother Murdock. He came and annointed me with oil and laid hands on me for my recovery. I immediately got better and went to a meeting where Brother Murdock and I laid hands on those four persons we had baptized today, and confirmed them in the Church Of Latter Day Saints." (12)

The settlers at Carson Valley were prospering, many for the first time in their lives. Joseph and his family were comfortably situated and for the first time in years he was making money from his land. A school for 25 students was built and plans were made for a church house, but trouble was brewing between the Mormons and their miner neighbors. The miners refused to accept Judge Hyde's probate court as being legal, believing his decisions were always in favor of the Mormons, while the Saints felt they couldn't get justice in the miner's courts. To add to their problems, the miners paid their taxes to California, placing the entire cost of schools and other government costs entirely upon the Mormons. In elections during the fall of 1856 the miners had organized their own "political party

which they called the Human Party, to oppose the Mormon ticket. But the Mormon candidates captured every office with 96 votes compared to the Human Parties total of only 32 votes. The miners charges that the Mormons voted in a block brought back memories of Nauvoo to Joseph.

Mormon land titles were challenged also, and even Joseph and Abraham Hunsaker weren't exempt from title troubles, for a man named Wade appeared and claimed ownership of their ranch. Joseph told him that he had paid "Lucky Bill" for the property, so he and Hunsaker intended to keep it. Wade didn't give up easily and started legal action against them, but Joseph and Hunsaker let it be known that they would fight for their farm, the best in Carson County. Brigham Young was advised of their problems with the miners and saw in their troubles bitter memories of Missouri and Nauvoo. He wrote to them, "It is not worth the sacrifice of one good man. If western Utah is desirable and coveted by the gentiles, they will not rest in peace until they drive our people out."<sup>(13)</sup> Joseph and the other settlers at Carson Valley were determined not to surrender their homes or be driven out, but unknown to them or even to Brigham Young, a decision already made in far away Washington had decided the fate of their mission, and their very lives as well.

For some time relations between the Mormons and the federal government had become more and more strained. The most controversial problem was that of polygamy, but a more immediate problem was that federal officials sent to Utah Territory claimed that they were ignored, and that Mormon probate courts were the only recognized

law. Charges and counter-charges and harsh words on both sides added fuel to the fire, and public statements such as one made by Brigham Young in 1847 when he said "Give us ten years and we will ask no quarter of the United States"<sup>(14)</sup> couldn't help but arouse suspicion in official Washington. By mid-summer of 1857 a state of war existed between the Utah Territory and the United States, none of which Joseph could understand at his isolated home in Carson Valley, but which he would understand all too well before that long summer was over.

On May 28th, 1857 President James Buchanan ordered the United States Army into Utah Territory with orders to General William Selby Harney to resolve the "Mormon problem" once and for all and to capture Salt Lake City before winter. General Harney replied, "I am ordered there and I will winter in Salt Lake Valley or I will winter in hell!"<sup>(15)</sup> Both President Buchanan and General Harney grossly underestimated the will of the Mormon people or their determination to defend their homes, for General Harney never saw Salt Lake City and was removed from his command in disgrace, while President Buchanan would be held in contempt by nearly everyone in every quarter of the land. But that was all in the future, all Joseph and the rest of the settlers at Carson Valley knew was that they were at war with the United States.

On September 5th, 1857 just when it seemed to Joseph that at last he had found a permanent home for his family, his old friend Peter Conover arrived from Salt Lake City bearing a message from Brigham Young to Mission President Chester Loveland. All of the

settlers were stunned at the message, which read, "There is an army of 2,500 to 3,500 enroute to this territory. We have concluded it is wisdom that you should dispose of your property as well as you can. Make no noise about your business, but let all things be done quietly and in order. Return immediately and bring all the guns and bullets you can buy."<sup>(16)</sup> In his journal Abraham Hunsaker told the story in even plainer words. "We received an express from Brigham Young to sell out and start home in two weeks, as the United States has waged war against the Saints, and is sending 3,000 soldiers to Great Salt Lake City. Brother Brigham told us he didn't expect the army would be allowed to come in. This puts an end to our farming in this country."<sup>(17)</sup> All of their hard work and risks had been for naught, the Carson Valley Mission was to be abandoned.

With heavy hearts Joseph and the other settlers began disposing of their property, selling everything they owned for a pittance, for the miners and other gentiles knew the Mormons had no time to waste and offered only a small part of what their properties were actually worth. \$12,600 was raised from the sale of property and from Bishop Loveland's tithing receipts. Peter Conover, Oliver Huntington and Bob Walker took most of the gold collected and went over the Sierras to San Francisco where they purchased "500 pistols, a wagon load of rifles and 2,700 pounds of ammunition."<sup>(18)</sup>

Meanwhile at Salt Lake City a shop was built on Temple Square where revolvers based on Samuel Colt's patents were manufactured at the rate of twenty per week. Sam Colt had earlier presented Brigham Young with a pair of his famous revolvers, at which time he said,

"Brigham Young is the sort of man who can appreciate the advantages of possessing arms of my invention to protect his people from savages and white marauders who are always willing to rob honest persons who have not the power to protect themselves."<sup>(19)</sup> In view of Colt's high opinion of Young, it is possible that he gave the Mormon leader permission to duplicate his patented revolvers.

Peter Conover hauled the guns and ammunition he had purchased to Placerville and then loaded them on pack animals to take them over the Sierras. He was followed all the way by a gang of drunken and rowdy miners who tried to take the weapons from him. In his journal Conover told of a close call he had with the miners. "The miner's big Captain came up to me and wanted to know what I was going to do with all the guns and ammunition I had purchased. I told him what I had bought was mine, and it was none of his business what I did with it. He said, I will see you again before you get to Carson! I told him, if you follow me, I will kill you and bury you without a sheet! We started out and I never saw the big Captain again, although his miners continued to follow us."<sup>(20)</sup> Several other parties also went over the mountains on back trails which Joseph told them of and purchased additional supplies at Angel's Camp, including 300 pounds of gunpowder and nearly a ton of lead.

At Carson Valley the heavy weapons, lead and gunpowder were loaded into a wagon, but the load was too heavy for one team to pull. Peter Conover related that Joseph Murdock furnished an extra team for the wagon. "I sold Joseph Murdock my little wagon for his family to ride in for \$50, and then bought a large wagon from Warren

Smith at Reese's Station for \$200. The load was too heavy for my mules so I asked for another team and Joseph Murdock furnished a mule and a horse."<sup>(21)</sup> The Carson Valley settlers started on their return trip to Salt Lake City on September 20th, 1857 in a train of nearly 200 wagons and 250 people, in five companies of fifty, with Conover as Captain. But as they were soon to learn, their troubles with the California miners weren't over yet.

At the sinks of the Humboldt a band of miners came up to the Mormon's horse herd in the dead of night and demanded that they be allowed to enter the herd to locate several of their horses which they claimed the settlers had. Their intention was to stampede the horses so that the men of the wagon train would have no means of moving their wagon load of munitions. Captain Conover described what happened. "When I went to relieve the guard at midnight, the miners came and wanted to get their horses, saying they would rather ride at night. I told them they could not go in the herd, for if they did it would cause a stampede. Of course this is what they wanted to do. Joseph Murdock came up to them and said, The first man that swings a lasso in that herd of horses is a dead man! He meant what he said too!"<sup>(22)</sup>

Conover then told the miners to go back to their camp and that he would look for their horses in the morning. When they returned to their camp Conover placed them under guard to prevent further mischief. In the morning Conover opened a keg of whiskey and gave the miners all they could drink. He wrote, "They all got drunk and decided that Mormons weren't so bad after all. We asked them

if they would sell their guns and they all did except one, a young fellow who said his weapon belonged to his father. They all said they would never follow a Mormon again!"(23)

The wagon train was crossing the worst part of the Forty Mile Desert when Eliza was ready to give birth. She later told her grand-children how hard her ordeal was, and how she could hardly keep up with the wagons. As she trudged along she was hungry and thirsty, and fell to thinking of all the good things she had never had to eat. For some reason she thought of a lobster, and how if she could only taste one, how good it would be. As she walked along she could think of nothing else until she could hardly endure her longing. By the side of the trail she spied a small box which had been lost or discarded and she picked it up. The box had a picture of a lobster on it! Eliza had never even seen a lobster, but she tied the small box in her apron and it seemed to relieve her longing and give her the strength to go on, for in an hour or so she caught up with the wagons again.

Eliza's time had come and Joseph stopped his wagon in the shade of a great rock where the baby was born. They had no water to bathe the new-born baby in so Joseph had all of the children urinate in a wash basin so he could have something to wash the baby in, after which they continued on again, for they had no time to waste nor could they risk being left alone in the desert. They named the baby Rocksina for the large rock they had stopped by. Eliza later said she didn't know how the box with the picture of a lobster on it came to be in the middle of the desert, but from then on she would only wish for things she could have!(24)

The return to Salt Lake City was a hard one, for the Carson pioneers were in a hurry and took the direct desert route across the Great Salt Desert instead of following the easier Malad and Bear River route they had taken to Carson. Their spirits were low too, for they were once again leaving what they had hoped would be their permanent homes and were returning to they knew not what, knowing only that they had been called to defend Zion's borders against an army which could be another Missouri or Illinois mob sent to drive them from their homes, this time with government help.

From the Humboldt Sink they crossed a dreary desert country to Ruby Valley and Steptoe Valley and then followed the Egan Trail around the south side of the Great Salt Lake Desert. They crossed Skull Valley to Grantsville and continued to Salt Lake City, arriving the first week in October, less than a month after Brigham had called them home. Although family records show Rocksina's birth date as October 30th, 1857, both written and oral journals and traditions relate the story of how she was born along the trail several weeks earlier. We can only assume that she was born at the Humboldt Sinks but that her birth wasn't recorded until after her families return to Salt Lake City.

With Joseph's stabilizing influence gone, the Indians at Carson Valley began attacking gentile settlers there. The following July two miners were killed by Indians, which led to the Pyramid Lake War in which Major William Ormsby and sixty miners were killed in what proved to be Nevada's worst massacre. And "Lucky Bill" Thorington, whose ranch Joseph had purchased, wasn't really lucky at all, for he



was hung as a horse thief in June, 1858!

Joseph had little time to rest at Salt Lake City, for he hardly had time to get his family settled before he was sent on another mission. Eliza and her children went to live with Eunice at American Fork while Jane and Elizibeth and their families returned to their small cabin at White's Fort. After living at their rock home at Carson it must have been a real let down, for the cabin had been used as a stock shed while they were away. Pernetta returned to live with Eunice while Pick remained with Jane and Elizibeth.

They were hardly settled before Joseph was called to defend Echo Canyon against the advance of the army. In his journal Peter Conover tells just how little time they had. "I staid at home only four days when I got my orders to go to Echo Canyon, starting for there on October 10th. I took two prisoners to Wall's Camp and then Bill Hickman and I carried an express to Governor Young."<sup>(25)</sup> It was war, and to Joseph it looked like Nauvoo all over again.

## Footnotes - Chapter 6

1. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 7, Leonard Arrington, Las Vegas Sun Press, 1979
2. Deseret News, July 30th, 1853
3. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 11, Arrington, Las Vegas Sun Press, 1979
4. Ibid, Pg 14
5. Journal JSM
6. Journal of Abraham Hunsaker, Utah State Historical Society
7. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg. 15, Arrington, 1979
8. Heart Throbs Of The West, Vol 7, Pg 452, DUP, SLC
9. Journal JSM
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Heart Throbs Of The West, Vol 7, Pg 453, DUP, SLC
13. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 16, Arrington, 1979
14. Utah Writers Project, Pg 70, Hastings House, New York, 1941
15. History Of Utah, Pg 512, Hubert Howe Bancroft, San Francisco, 1889
16. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 20, Arrington, 1979
17. Heart Throbs Of The West, Vol 7, Pg 454, DUP, SLC
18. Holy Smoke, A Dissertation On The Utah War, Pg 103, Paul Bailey, Westernlore, 1978 Also, Great Basin Kingdom, Pg 177, Leonard Arrington, University of Nebraska, 1966
19. Yankee Arms Maker, Pg 232, Rohan, New York, 1935
20. Journal of Peter Conover, Utah State Historical Society
21. Ibid
22. Ibid, Also Heart Throbs Of The West, Pg 449, Vol 7, DUP, SLC

Footnotes - Chapter 6 (Cont)

23. Journal of Peter Conover, Utah State Historical Society
24. Journal JSM
25. Journal of Peter Conover, USHS and Heart Throbs Of The West,  
Vol 7, Pg 454, DUP, SLC